

Just open up the VA's budget documents and you will see a host of performance measures that show a degree of institutional accountability that is the envy of other Government agencies and roundly praised by independent observers. Let me tick off a few of those performance measures, and as I am doing so, please be mindful of how the improvements in these areas during the Bush years have impacted the lives of veterans.

The percentage of patients who report being seen within 20 minutes of scheduled appointments by the VA care facilities has improved from 65 percent in 2002 to 73 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of primary care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date has improved from 89 percent in 2002 to 96 percent through the end of last year.

The percentage of specialty care appointments scheduled within 30 days of the desired date have improved from 86 percent in 2002 to 93 percent this year.

The number of veterans the VA treats in noninstitutional, long-term care settings has increased by 50 percent since 2002.

And the list goes on and on and on.

In 2004, the Rand Corporation examined why VA patients get better chronic preventative care than similar U.S. audits. The answer? Rand concluded that the VA's edge is linked to improved information technology, tracking of performance, and accountability. And that is when in these charts this kind of recognition began to take over. All of this was ignored in the speech by the Senator from Washington. So let's look at some of those facts.

Washington Monthly is not necessarily a publication that constantly praises the Bush administration, but it says VA care is the "best care anywhere"—a tremendous statement and a very fine article about the phenomenal increases in quality health care delivered by the Veterans' Administration over the last number of years.

That is not the end of that story. Here is another part of that story, and this comes from not a Washington publication but from Time magazine. It goes on to say in this article how VA hospitals have become the best in the Nation. It says that for the sixth year in a row—let's backtrack to the Bush administration. I think they have been around a few years, maybe 6 or more. VA hospitals last year scored higher than private facilities on the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index. The VA scored 83 out of 100. Private institutions scored 71 out of 100. That is a pretty good record. In fact, it is the best record in the United States.

Now, what did BusinessWeek magazine say about it? They said something very similar. They said that 154 hospitals and 871 clinics run by the Veterans' Administration have been ranked best in class by a number of independent groups on a broad range of

measures from chronic care to heart disease treatment, and on and on. The VA's prescription for accuracy rates is greater than 99.97 percent. That is the rest of the story, and it is a mighty important story.

Now, let me talk just a few minutes about money because I think that is part of why we are as successful as we are, but it is also a phenomenal statement of this Congress—yes, a Republican-led Congress—and this administration's commitment to America's veterans. What are those accomplishments during the Bush years? Let me list a few.

With enactment of the 2007 budget, VA's health care budget will have increased 70 percent during the Bush years. Look at the numbers. Here they are. Those are undeniable. Those, in fact, are facts. They are budgetary facts. It is one of the fastest growth rates and increases in budget in any other area except defense in a time of war in this period of budgeting of the U.S. Government. Has a Republican-led Congress turned its back on American veterans? Quite the opposite.

The GI bill educational benefits for veterans has been boosted by 65 percent, raising the lifetime benefit from \$23,400 to \$38,700.

A new educational program was created for members of the Guard and Reserve activated after September 11, 2001, providing up to \$39,960 in lifetime benefits.

The educational benefit for survivor and dependents of vets has been increased by 46 percent.

The maximum VA home loan guarantee has been increased by 107 percent.

The largest expansion of the National Cemetery System since the Civil War is currently underway.

Historic legislation was enacted to permit certain disabled veterans to receive their disability and military retirement benefits concurrently.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to update and strengthen civilian protection available to members of the Armed Forces.

Comprehensive legislation was enacted to improve job training and placement services for veterans.

A new insurance program was created to provide immediate benefits—payments of between \$25,000 to \$100,000 to servicemembers who have been traumatically injured since the beginning of the war on terror. Mr. President, 2,700 injured veterans have received that benefit.

That is the record. That is the record, and that is the one this Congress and this President have responded to in a most timely and, more importantly, responsible fashion.

Now that I think the record is clear, what are some of the other answers?

Well, some on the other side would say it is money, money, money, and more money. We have found it is quite the opposite. It is making the system we have work more efficiently, more

responsibly. We are now reshaping VA to handle the high-tech problems it has had, or the informational problems it has had, to make sure we secure the names and the lists and the informational flow of our veterans and their backgrounds. I am extremely proud of the work we have done, and we have done it in a bipartisan way.

So why now, in the late hours of this year, are we all of a sudden hearing all of these things that are what I believe to be improper statements about the Veterans' Administration? Well, I think we have to recognize what is at hand. It is a political year. But there is something we have never done; that is, politicize veterans or politicize our military. And we shouldn't start now.

Our record is strong. Our support of veterans has always been there. I have given my colleagues the facts and the numbers. I am proud of the accomplishments we have made this year alone, a near 14 percent increase in veterans health care or veterans budgets in general. There is no other agency of our Government except Defense that has had that kind of an increase.

So let's recognize what the year is all about. It is politics and it is political. What I have given my colleagues is a factual accounting of the great successes we have had in veterans affairs, with veterans, delivering service to veterans. That doesn't mean we are perfect and it doesn't mean every veteran got exactly what they wanted the moment they asked for it. That will never exist. But we will be responsive. We do care. And the expression on the part of this Congress, this President, and the American taxpayer in relation to the support of our veterans is, in fact, unprecedented.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Who yields time?

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I note the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ISAKSON). Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. STEVENS. Mr. President, I believe it is time to close morning business.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct. Morning business is closed.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2007—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the hour of 10 a.m. having arrived, the Senate will resume